

News

The Future of Global Health

After a year of chaos, US CDC's global health work hangs in the balance

Staff cuts, loss of expertise, shuttered programs, and the withdrawal from the World Health Organization are worrying those who've invested deeply in the agency's decades-long work in global health.

By **Sara Jerving** // 12 January 2026



A sign supporting workers of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is displayed outside of the entrance to its facility in Atlanta, Georgia, on Nov. 20, 2025. Photo by: Alyssa Pointer / Reuters

The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) is reeling from a tumultuous year — a battered agency that endured [chaotic layoffs](#) and has been injected with misinformation under the leadership of Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — an [anti-vaccine activist](#).

While much of the global health impacts under the Trump administration came in the wake of the dismantling of the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#), and many changes to CDC have been domestic — there's still a raft of changes impacting the Atlanta-based agency's ability to effectively execute its global health work.

This worries both current and former staff who've invested deeply in building the foundation for this work.

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Dr. Tom Frieden, chief executive officer of the global health organization [Resolve to Save Lives](#), who served as CDC's director from 2009 to 2017, told Devex that the future of CDC's global health work lingers "very much in the balance."

And now, the whole nature of the U.S.'s global health work is amid a colossal shift. The U.S. State Department has signed over a dozen direct [bilateral agreements](#) with countries — with more to come.

The role CDC will play within these agreements is unclear, but it's expected that it will still provide technical assistance in areas such as surveillance and outbreak response. For example, in Kenya, the government said it [will jointly test](#) specimen samples with CDC.

Traditionally, funding often would flow through CDC to partners, and the agency provided technical expertise. But there's some concern that CDC will be seen simply as having technical experts, but not tapped as a resource for program input.

There are also concerns around the role of CDC, given the [transactional nature](#) of the bilateral agreements.

"Will Zambia give us mining rights? And if so: Here's the money. But then, do you really care about having CDC experts there?" asked a former CDC global health staff member, whose position was terminated last year.

Chaotic cuts

Over decades, CDC has supported countries in areas such as implementing health programs, placing millions of people on HIV treatment as an implementing agency for [PEPFAR](#), conducting research, building up laboratories, training epidemiologists, and supporting outbreak response.

"CDC is a powerhouse in terms of the capacity to support effective programs globally," Frieden said. "They have expertise — not just about the technical issues — but deep knowledge about the countries where outbreaks are much more likely to happen."

The agency's global health work became more centralized in 2010, when it established a global health center, which now has three divisions — global immunization, global health protection, and global HIV and TB.

"It became much more structured, with a much bigger footprint," said [Dr. Kevin De Cock](#), who was the inaugural director of CDC's Global Health Center, and former director of CDC's country mission in Kenya.

But when the Trump administration assumed power, the agency fell under an avalanche of criticism. Former CDC Director Susan Monarez testified that RFK. Jr. referred to CDC as "the most corrupt federal agency in the world," calling its employees "horrible people" that "were killing children." And the administration proposed a [54%](#) cut to the agency's 2026 budget.

In tandem with firings across the federal government, last April, the administration imposed a [reduction in workforce](#), known as an RIF, for CDC staff.

Within the division of global HIV and tuberculosis, the staff from six of 13 branches were initially laid off or reassigned — with one branch brought back.

At that moment, Dr. Kayla Laserson, then head of CDC's global health center — who has decades of global health experience, including many years overseas — was removed and told she would be reassigned to the Indian Health Service, along with other senior leaders across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and placed on

service, along with other senior leaders across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and placed on administrative leave. She was replaced by an acting director from another part of the agency. After more than six months on administrative leave, Laserson left the agency for the Gates Foundation.

Another round of CDC-wide job cuts came in October. More than 1,300 employees [received RIF](#) notices, then, about 700 of those people received emails rescinding them the next day — with the administration claiming a coding error.

At that time, the administration told everybody in the office of the director of the Global Health Center they would no longer hold their positions — some to be reassigned and others to be fired. That included people working on containing the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the domestic measles outbreak. But the global health roles were then brought back.

Former and current employees described it as a state of continuous chaos of people being cut and then some reinstated — speculating the administration realized that critical functions such as responding to Ebola were cut, and so they then decided to backtrack on those decisions.

One former employee said they've heard CDC might be preparing for potential layoffs in April for those working in global HIV, once there's a better understanding of how the new bilateral agreements will function.

Beyond that, former employees said there's "pressured" early retirement, people leaving independently given the instability of the working environment, and the federal [hiring freeze](#) meant those on short-term roles haven't had contracts renewed, nor are people replacing those who've left. This has led to leadership gaps and short-staffed country offices, they said.

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The advertisement banner has a dark teal background on the left and a yellow background on the right. On the left, the text "FINANCING THE FUTURE: UNLOCKING CAPITAL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT" is displayed in white and yellow. Above this text are logos for devex, AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), Amundi, CEB, and FiC5 anniversary. On the right, there are three stylized white line-art figures: a person wearing a hard hat, a person in a lab coat, and a person using a shovel.

"In some places, there are very few U.S. people left to oversee all the U.S. dollars that are going in and making sure there's accountability," said a former employee.

And beyond current realities — there are long-term concerns around drawing in talent. A CDC job was considered stable, prestigious, and difficult to obtain — but also paid less than what a physician might get elsewhere.

"But once you had your job, there was a pretty good chance you would keep it. But also there's that privilege of working on something you could be so proud of," said Dr. Barbara Marston, who retired from CDC in 2022. Her last role at CDC was deputy director for science and program in the Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria. "Both of those things are completely damaged now — by design."

Wiped out

The agency layoffs affected entire branches. For example, the maternal child health branch, which worked on areas such as preventing the transmission of HIV from mother to child within PEPFAR, was wiped out.

There was also the loss of USAID and partner programs. For example, a lot of CDC's malaria work was funded by USAID, Marston said.

CDC has extensive scientific knowledge and programmatic knowledge about malaria, making it one of the "top institutions in the world" in this field, Frieden said, noting there's an ongoing need to innovate around the disease given the parasites and mosquitoes are becoming increasingly resistant to medications and insecticides.

CDC also has deep expertise in tuberculosis, and it provided about two-thirds of all HIV treatment under PEPFAR, Frieden said.

“There are many areas of public health that are highly specialized,” he said. “When you lose those capacities, they’re really not easy to regain.”

A trusted partner

The Trump administration’s new ["America First" global health strategy](#) aims to prevent outbreaks abroad from reaching U.S. soil. One of the worst outbreaks in recent memory was the 2014 to 2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak — where sporadic cases did reach the U.S.

Massive efforts were undertaken to control its spread, and CDC played an “enormous role” in this containment, De Cock said. He deployed several times to West Africa as CDC team lead in Liberia.

But if an outbreak of that scale happened now, there’s concern CDC couldn’t muster the same level of response.

“Would we be able to do that in an effective way today? I’m not sure we could, because we’re not organized. We’ve lost people,” De Cock said. “We certainly just couldn’t marshal the strength that we had back then.”

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Moving forward, there’s also concern around the unknown — for example, an outbreak of a new pathogen as deadly as Ebola and as transmissible as COVID-19.

“There’s no reason that couldn’t happen,” Marston said.

Former CDC employees said it’s crucial to have adequate levels of agency staff in countries to foster close government relationships that are built on trust. But there’s concern governments won’t lean as heavily on the U.S. if it’s unreliable. The Trump administration’s cutting and reinstating staff doesn’t help that perception.

“Who would choose to work with somebody who might be there and might not?” Marston asked.

Strong in-country relationships can also help ensure the U.S. receives firsthand information, such as on the severity of outbreaks, which can help the U.S. gear up for a more potent response and can inform travel warnings.

Outnumbered and isolated

The Trump administration cut ties with the [World Health Organization](#), abruptly severing a longstanding collaboration between CDC and WHO.

De Cock called leaving WHO a strategic mistake, noting that it could be ceding influence to American adversaries, lessening access to global health security information and collaboration, and potentially increasing US vulnerability.

WHO has attributes that cannot be replaced, De Cock said, such as its power to convene countries — which a country can’t do alone amid a pandemic.

CDC’s global immunization division is also being dismantled, Frieden said. CDC was providing about half of the public health professionals for this division to WHO’s headquarters in Geneva — which had to abruptly leave, he

said. This creates risks to laboratories in more than 190 countries that track diseases like measles and rubella, and allows the global community to stay ahead of microbes.

“We do know that there is always going to be new outbreaks because microbes outnumber us — billions to one, and they're constantly evolving,” he said. “We need our defenses to be ready and getting stronger.”

Update, Jan. 13, 2026: *This piece has been updated with information on global health leadership changes.*

More reading:

- ▶ [Haphazard US CDC staff cuts leave questions around impact](#)
- ▶ [US has begun bilateral health negotiations with 16 African nations](#)
- ▶ [US still wants global health cooperation, but not through WHO](#)

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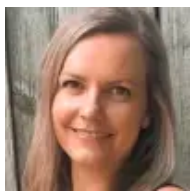
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About the author



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Sara Jerving is a Senior Reporter at Devex, where she covers global health. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, VICE News, and Bloomberg News among others. Sara holds a master's degree from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism where she was a Lorana Sullivan fellow. She was a finalist for One World Media's Digital Media Award in 2021; a finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists in 2018; and she was part of a VICE News Tonight on HBO team that received an Emmy nomination in 2018. She received the Philip Greer Memorial Award from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 2014.